



Editors: Irit Back and Joel Parker. Assistant Editor: Adi Kraut-Adler

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## **For Mozambique's government, is radical Islam exclusively a security issue?**

Rina Bassist

Brutal attacks in the past four years in the northern Mozambique province, Cabo Delgado, have forced hundreds of thousands of residents to leave their homes and flee. Estimates say some 670,000 civilians were forced from their homes in the north of Mozambique since October 2017.<sup>1</sup> Between January and November 2020, 400 violent incidents were perpetrated in the province, leaving more than 1,300 people dead.

The most recent March 24 attack in the city of Palma lasted four days and cost the lives of dozens of civilians and soldiers, including South African and British nationals. On March 29, Islamic State (ISIS) operatives claimed responsibility for it,<sup>2</sup> yet Mozambique authorities are not convinced that ISIS orchestrated the assault. Instead, they estimate that the assault was initiated, prepared, and perpetrated by the local Al-Shabaab group (unrelated to Somali Al-Shabaab), which belongs to Ansar al-Sunna

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<sup>1</sup> Juliana Ghazi, "[Fear and loss stalk Mozambicans fleeing insurgent violence](#)," *UNHCR*, March 22, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Emma Rumney and Omar Fahmy, "[Islamic State claims deadly attack on northern Mozambique town](#)," *Reuters*, March 29, 2021.

wal-Jamma (also known locally as Ahlu Sunnah wal-Jamaa or ASWJ).<sup>3</sup> This group constitutes one of two branches of the Islamic State's Central African Province (ISCAP), the other one operating in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but apparently rather independently.

Mozambique authorities are treating these attacks as terror acts, as does the US. On March 10, the State Department designated ISCAP a Foreign Terrorist organization.<sup>4</sup> Still, several analysts have estimated from the beginning that the ethnic dimension, poverty, and socioeconomic exclusion are central motivations in the expansion of ASWJ and in the increase of its attacks and their brutality. In this article we will examine whether describing the group as a terrorist organization reflects the Mozambique reality. In other words, could it be that the choice of labeling this solely a security issue and reacting to it exclusively militarily actually encourages the transformation of ASWJ from a local-grievance framework into a significant player in the African/global jihad arena? Could calling ASWJ terrorists bolster the jihadi narrative that the group desires?

### **Islam in Mozambique - history of religious cleavages**

In Cabo Delgado 54 percent of the residents are Muslims, compared with close to 20 percent across Mozambique.<sup>5</sup> Islam has been present in the region of today's Mozambique since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, initially by ways of Swahili and Indian Sufi merchants. The first Portuguese who arrived end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, estimated that Islam (or the African version of it) was already too deeply rooted and integrated within the local population for them to try and convert the local population to Christianity. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, as the Muslim trade of slaves expanded, so did Islamic influence. The ruling elite of the Angoche Sultanate, established along an archipelago off the northern Mozambique coastline, seized the commercial opportunity of the expanding slave trade, and started capturing people and selling them as slaves themselves. Converting into Islam was the only way for the small communities in the surrounding area to escape slave-trade raids. Angoche became at that period the capital of a

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<sup>3</sup> Here, we use the various names for this group as they have been transliterated into Latin script in local media, rather than our standard Arabic transliteration that follows the JMES guidelines.

<sup>4</sup> *US Department of State*, "[State Department terrorist designation of ISIS affiliates and leaders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique](#)," *Media Note*, March 10, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> *CIA World Factbook*, [Mozambique](#).

religiopolitical entity which stretched until Lake Malawi, spreading Islam as it spread its political influence.

A first orthodox stream of Islam (as opposed to the African-traditional version) appears in Mozambique towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, brought by Arab immigrants, who questioned several of the local practices. This conflict between the two streams will develop over the years, with growing presence of Islam influenced by preachers who studied in Egypt, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia.

The Portuguese colonial regime offered citizenship only to those who convert to Christianity, but guaranteed freedom of worship. Sufi Islam flourished during that period, spreading rapidly, especially among the youth. In fact, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two Sufi orders opposed the prevailing Mwalimu Islam (Islam of the teachers), much influenced by Swahili traditions and rituals. Brought by teachers from the Comoros Islands and Zanzibar, the Shadhiliya and Qadiriyya orders became active in east Africa, penetrating local communities in northern Mozambique.

Relations between the colonial regime and the country's Muslim communities grew increasingly strained during the *Estado Novo* period (1926-1974). The 1950s and 1960s marked an important change within the Mozambique Muslim landscape, as Islamists started emerging. The first Islamists were Indians or Indo-Africans who had traveled to India or Saudi Arabia to learn Islam at the religious seminaries there, and embraced a rigorous and literal view of Islamic dogma, and began questioning the Sufi rites. At first, they were mostly active in the south of Mozambique, not confronting the Sufi orders in the north, but this changed later. For instance, Aboubacar Musa Ismael (Mangira), who returned to Mozambique from studying in Medina in 1964, engaged in direct conflict with the Islam of north Mozambique. More so, parallel to the war for independence and later in the 1990s, a violent struggle arose between the adherents of Sufi and traditional Islam on one side, and the Wahhabis and Salafists on the other, with their universal vision.

Independence and the anti-clergy FRELIMO<sup>6</sup> regime increased inter-community, inter-religious tensions. But alongside its hostile approach to religion, the FRELIMO government also encouraged framing and institutionalizing Islamic leadership, leading to the creation in 1981 of Cislamo (the Islamic council of Mozambique), under Saudi-Wahabi influence. As a reaction, the Sufis established the Islamic Congress of Mozambique. These two entities now shape the social and religious lives of Muslims in the country.

### **ASWJ – a social powder keg**

According to some researchers, ASWJ (“followers of the prophetic tradition”) was established as early as 1998 by students who returned from Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Sudan. Others say the group first emerged in 2012, by followers of radical Kenyan cleric, Aboud Rogo Mohammed, who settled after his death in Cabo Delgado. Whichever version is more accurate, from its very beginning the group had links to Salafi circles in Tanzania, Kenya, and Somalia, with some of its militants religiously indoctrinated and military trained in Tanzania, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia. It was an informal structure advocating radical Islam as reaction to institutionalized Islam championed and personified by Cislamo. Since its creation, ASWJ has distributed speeches by Rogo, but refrained from other publications or types of communication. It has not taken responsibility for any of its assaults.

ASWJ was first noticed by Mozambique authorities in 2015, with incidents of looting and attacks against villagers. Already then, ASWJ leaders started setting up training camps for their militants. Members of the group began confronting local religious leaders openly, also within mosques. Then, in 2017, the group’s modus operandi changed, notably with a series of attacks against police stations in the port town Mocimboa da Praia. ASWJ attacks became more complicated, even staged, operating by means of terror such as setting villages on fire, kidnapping, mutilating, carrying out public executions, and beheadings (displaying ISIS tactics). Machetes were replaced by

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<sup>6</sup> Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Liberation Front of Mozambique) was a nationalist movement fighting for the self-determination and independence of Mozambique from Portuguese colonial rule. FERLIMO became a political party in 1977. FRELIMO Party (Partido FRELIMO) has ruled Mozambique since then.

firearms, stolen from security forces. In April 2018, the group pledged alliance to ISIS. One year later, in April 2019, ISIS announced the formation of ISCAP.

What sets ASWJ apart from other Islamist groups in Africa is chiefly its composition. The hierarchic structure of its leadership is unclear and apparently blur, though Abu Yasir Hassan has been cited as senior figure. Testimonies and bodies of fighters retrieved after attacks showed that many of the group members are young, even minors. Ostensibly, most of its fighters are marginalized youth. These are fishermen, small traders and miners who felt ostracized and ignored by the Mozambican government. For them, traditional Islamic religious authorities (Cislamo) are part of a government which had left them in poverty, while giant gas companies (ENI, EXXON Mobile, Total) and international ruby-mining groups continue to take over territories, expropriating lands, and fishing zones. The parallels drawn by these youth between institutionalized Islam established in the south of Mozambique and the government failure to alleviate poverty in the north, is a rather convincing explanation of the success of ASWJ recruitment. It is worth noticing, despite the cruelty of its assaults on villages in Cabo Delgado, the group still manages to recruit young people.

These sentiments of marginalization are driven by ethnic and economic disparities between the Kimwani and Makonde tribes, in a poor province, in one of the world's poorest countries. In fact, even before the discovery of natural gas, the Cabo Delgado province, on the border with Tanzania, was plagued with corruption and trafficking of precious stones and drugs, mostly heroine transiting from Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Kimwani are much poorer than the Makonde. Many of them are fishermen who traditionally live along the coastline. With Makonde people relocating in recent years to sea-shore areas, tensions between these communities had increased. Kimwani people, who used to dominate the Makone before the colonial era, harbor bitterness vis-à-vis the richer predominantly Christian Makonde ethnic group, which is also the clan of President Filipe Nyusi. Several of Nyusi's associates, including several generals, reportedly have financial interests in Cabo Delgado.

The large deposits of graphite used to make lithium batteries on the coastline, and the discovery of rubies and of large quantities of natural gas in the region in 2011 has ignited this socioeconomic powder keg. In 2017, artisanal, independent miners were expelled and banned from digging, in favor of the big mining consortiums, adding to

the bitterness of Kimwani people. Thus, it is no coincidence most of the homes targeted in assaults were Makonde.

The February 2018 attack on the village of Mitumbate<sup>7</sup> illustrated those mixed emotions motivating ASWJ. Twenty-seven houses, mostly Makonde, were set on fire and a crude bomb was thrown into the small village church. The attackers then replaced the red flag of Mozambique's ruling party (hanging at the village center) with their own flag, which is an off-white background with a green crescent moon and a star.

### **Mozambique, international community - Security response**

Since the emergence of ASWJ, the Mozambique government had assimilated expressions of radical Islam and what it sees as terror acts into one problem, which it believes requires a security response. One could offer two reasons for this. First, it discards the state's responsibility for the long-year neglect of the region and recent security escalation. Second, by stressing the terrorist problem, it could obtain the support of the West, or the international community, to help reign in ASWJ.

Maputo's calculation seems to be working, as far as drawing on support from western states: several foreign countries are involved in the efforts to militarily curb the emerging Islamist threats. For instance, on March 15, 2021 (five days after designating ASWJ as a terror organization), US Special Forces started training Mozambican troops to repel ASWJ fighters.<sup>8</sup> Speaking at a press conference in Pretoria on May 28, 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron offered to monitor the maritime zone off Mozambique as part of the fight against jihadi groups active in the north.<sup>9</sup> On June 23, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) approved the deployment of joint forces in Mozambique in support of its effort to combat terrorism.<sup>10</sup> In this framework, Rwanda started July 9 deploying 1,000 troop in the Cabo Delgado province.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Hill and Borges Nhamire, "[Ethnic tensions menace Mozambique natural gas boom](#)," *WORLD OIL*, February 7, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> [Mozambique: Extremism and Terrorism; Counter-Extremism Project](#), no author or date.

<sup>9</sup> Élysée, "[Déclaration à la presse du Président Emmanuel Macron et du Président Cyril Ramaphosa](#)," May 28, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Southern African Development Community (SADC), "[Communiqué of the extraordinary summit of SADC heads of state and government](#)," June 23, 2021.

If indeed the deep causes of the current violence are rooted in social conditions, these military moves will not suffice. Mozambique authorities would need to tackle the local politics behind the upsurge of violence, its societal and developmental dimensions. As things stand now, ironically, by addressing ASWJ attacks solely as a security issue, Mozambique and its international partners are pushing the group into the global Jihad corner, as they offer no other solution for the frustrated youngsters that keep joining it.

Clearly, Mozambique needs an effective security strategy, that would involve regional intelligence efforts and cooperation, especially with Tanzania, to deny ASWJ from funding, weapons, and training structures. Still, for the long-term, Mozambique would need to adopt a much more holistic approach, that would include development plans that would offer the frustrated youngsters an alternative to radical Islam, in the form of vocational training, incentives to the creation of small businesses, and the like. By currently focusing on a security approach, Mozambique's government is conveying a message that a battle of religions can only be won by force.

*Rina Bassist is the head of the Africa Desk at the Israel Public Broadcasting Corporation (Kan Radio) Foreign News Department, based in Paris. She also writes for the Jerusalem Post and Al-Monitor. Prior to her journalistic career, Rina Bassist served in Israel's diplomatic corps.*

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